

New Wednesday 12/09/20

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'We'll Have Enough Vaccines': US Health Department Dismisses Concerns of COVID Vaccine Shortages
by [Mary F.](#)

There has been growing concern that there will be a vaccine shortage in the US once a viable vaccine is released for public use, especially after reports surfaced that US President Donald Trump's administration earlier this year turned down an offer to purchase more Pfizer vaccines. US Health and Human Services Secretary (HHS) Alex Azar said on Tuesday that the Trump administration is confident that it has enough contracts with pharmaceutical companies to ensure there are sufficient doses to vaccinate all Americans.

"We are very confident that during the second quarter of next year we'll have enough vaccines for every American who wants to be vaccinated," Azar said during a Milken Institute health summit, [The Hill reported](#). "So, I don't see where this math is coming from."

The US in July agreed to buy 100 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine, which would only be able to vaccinate 50 million Americans, since each person would require two doses. In addition, the administration also has a contract for 100 million doses of a vaccine from Moderna, which requires that each patient take two doses as well.

Overall, Operation Warp Speed, the name given to the public-private partnership initiative by the US government to accelerate the development and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics, has contracts with six different companies, which include Pfizer and Moderna, for at least 800 million doses and an option for up to 3 billion, according to The Hill.

Azar's latest comments come after the New York Times [released a report](#) earlier this week claiming that the Trump administration passed on the offer a few months ago to buy additional doses of Pfizer's vaccine. The US, at the time, only agreed to buy 100 million doses as part of the \$1.95 billion deal. According to the Times, the US may not be able to obtain more Pfizer vaccine doses until June, since other countries have already purchased doses of the limited-quantity drug.

"Pfizer did offer an additional allotment coming out of that [Michigan] plant, basically the second quarter allotment, to the United States government multiple times, and as recently as after the interim data came out and we knew this vaccine looked to be effective," Former US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Commissioner Scott Gottlieb, now a member of the Pfizer Board of Directors, [revealed to The Hill](#).

"I think they're betting that more than one vaccine's going to get authorized and there will be more vaccines on the market, and that perhaps could be why they didn't take up that additional 100 million option agreement," Gottlieb added.

However, the Trump administration has denied turning down an opportunity to purchase more Pfizer vaccines a few months ago, with one senior administration official, who did not want to be

publicly identified, [stating](#) that there will be a "sufficient number of doses to vaccinate all Americans who desire one before the end of the second quarter of 2021."

Moncef Slaoui, the chief science adviser for Operation Warp Speed, did not deny the Times' claim and instead stated that the administration is relying on vaccines from six different pharmaceutical companies.

"Let me remind everybody what our strategy is and has always been: We selected six different vaccines to build a portfolio to manage the risk that some may work and some may not work, but also to ensure that as more than one would work we would accumulate vaccine doses from this portfolio of vaccines," Slaoui said on ABC Tuesday, The Hill reported.

"In the summer if somebody came to us and said 'Let's buy more of this vaccine or that vaccine,' no one reasonable would buy more from any one of those vaccines because we didn't know which one would work and which one may be better than the other," he added.

Currently, the two most promising vaccines that may be used in the US have been developed by Pfizer and Moderna. Both drugs use technology involving messenger RNA (mRNA), the set of instructions used by cells to make proteins; mRNA vaccines are a relatively new type of treatment that work by providing instructions to healthy cells to generate antibodies for a certain virus or bacterium.

Conventional vaccines, on the other hand, introduce a weakened or dead virus or bacterium into the body. This induces an immune system response, allowing the body to recognize and fight the pathogen in the future.

Pfizer and Moderna have both applied for emergency use authorizations from the FDA. An external expert committee is expected to review data from Pfizer's vaccine by Thursday to determine whether the FDA should authorize it as the United States' first COVID-19 vaccine. If the drug is authorized, the first doses of it could be shipped as early as Friday, [USA Today reported](#).

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US Treasury Sanctions Chinese Organized Crime Boss 'Broken Tooth'
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) has also imposed sanctions on Liberian Senator Harry Varney Gboto-Nambi Sherman over bribery allegations, and former Kyrgyz Republic Customs Service official Raimbek Matraimov for his alleged role in laundering some \$700 million.

The US Treasury [announced Global Magnitsky designations on Wednesday](#) against a number of "corrupt actors," including Wan Kuok Koi, a member of the Communist Party of China's (CCP) Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and leader of the 14K Triad, "one of the largest Chinese organized criminal organizations in the world that engages in drug trafficking, illegal gambling, racketeering, human trafficking, and a range of other criminal activities."

The release detailed that 65-year-old Wan, commonly known as "Broken Tooth" was designated "for being a foreign person who is a leader or official of an entity ... that has engaged in, or whose members have engaged in, corruption."

A total of three entities "owned or controlled by Broken Tooth" [were also designated](#): the Cambodia-based World Hongmen History and Culture Association, Hong Kong-based Dongmei Group and Palau-based Palau China Hung-Mun Cultural Association.

"The 14K Triad is utilizing Broken Tooth's World Hongmen History and Culture Association as an effort to legitimize itself," the Treasury release claimed. "The World Hongmen History and Culture Association has managed to co-opt elite figures in Malaysia and Cambodia."

The US Treasury went on to state the alleged actions of the World Hongmen History and Culture Association, founded by Wan in 2018, continue "a pattern of overseas Chinese actors trying to paper over illegal criminal activities by framing their actions in terms of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the China Dream, or other major initiatives of the CCP."

Wan was released from a Macau prison in 2012 following his 14-year stint for organized crime charges, including those which involved a string of murders and bombings in Macau, [according to the Straits Times](#).

Earlier this year, Malaysia-based investment holding firm Inix Technologies Holdings Berhad [appointed Wan as chairman](#).

The company release on the matter referred to Wan as a businessman within Macau's entertainment industry and owner of Macau National Ying VIP Club and National Ying Entertainment Co. Ltd.

Sanctions against Wan and other "corrupt actors" came as part of International Anti-Corruption Day, an annual anti-corruption initiative observed since 2003.

"On International Anti-Corruption Day, Treasury remains fully committed to imposing costs on those who facilitate corruption at the expense of the people," said Deputy Treasury Secretary Justin G. Muzinich in the release.

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The Netflix Effect: Streaming Service Gains Momentum as Potential Advertising Powerhouse by [Mary F.](#)

After the third quarter of 2020, US video content platform and production company Netflix had roughly 195 million subscribers worldwide, with more and more people turning to video streaming services rather than traditional TV services, the latest data reveals.

The [popularity of Netflix](#) in today's society has led to the coining of a new term: The "Netflix Effect." According to [a 2019 article by Blake Morgan at Forbes](#), the term refers to when "a new series catapults an unknown actor to fame - overnight - a result of millions of people binge-watching a show."

One of the reasons Netflix has become so popular for consumers, according to Morgan, is that the platform allows viewers to decide what type of content they want to watch. In addition, Netflix has been producing its own original shows that are popular among viewers.

In 2018, Netflix budgeted some [\\$13 billion for content](#), with around 85% of that going toward original content. For example, the 2018 [Netflix original movie "Bird Box"](#) was viewed by 45 million accounts during its opening week.

Similarly, "The Queen's Gambit," an original drama series, became Netflix's most-watched scripted limited series after its release on October 23, [reported Deadline](#).

The outlet notes that "The Queen's Gambit" has been watched by at least 62 million households. The series stars Anya Taylor-Joy as chess prodigy Beth Harmon and is based on a novel of the same title by Walter Tevis. Set during the Cold War era, the show chronicles the life of Harmon, an orphan who struggles with drug and alcohol addiction, as she becomes the world's greatest chess player.

In the wake of the show's debut, sales of chess sets have [surged by 125%, the New York Times reported](#), citing market research company NPD. This suggests that Netflix has enormous potential as an advertising powerhouse.

"Manufacturers and retailers weren't likely prepared for this increase in sales," Juli Lennett, a toy industry analyst with NPD, told the Times. "So, if consumers want a chess set to give as a gift, I would highly recommend they buy it now before they sell out."

In addition, one toy company, Goliath Games, [revealed to NPR](#) that sales of its chess sets have spiked by more than 1,000% since late October, compared to the same period last year.

"Our October sales for chess were up 178% over the same period last year," Mary Higbe, director of marketing at Goliath Games, told the outlet. "That's a big increase. But something else unexpected happened at the end of the month," she added, noting that chess sales at the end of October went up by 1,048% following the release of "The Queen's Gambit."

Although Netflix does not currently include commercials in its model and has said it will not introduce ads to the platform, some marketers believe ads could be a substantial revenue stream if the company decides to go down that path, [Quartz explains](#).

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'Absolutely Reprehensible': US Anne Frank Memorial Vandalized With Swastika Flyers - Photos by [Mary F.](#)

The latest data by the Anti-Defamation League shows that there were more than 2,100 anti-Semitic incidents of assault, vandalism and harassment in the US in 2019, an increase of 12% over the previous year and the highest rate in at least four decades.

The Anne Frank Human Rights Memorial in Boise, Idaho, was vandalized on Monday with swastika stickers and flyers, becoming the most recent high-profile case of [anti-Semitism](#) in the US.

In a statement on Facebook, the Wassmuth Center for Human Rights shared photos of flyers bearing swastikas and the phrase "we are everywhere" plastered across the monument, which is jointly maintained by the Wassmuth Center for Human Rights and the Boise Department of Parks and Recreation.

"These stickers were plastered throughout the Memorial yesterday," the Wassmuth Center shared on Facebook on Wednesday. "I fear for what is happening to our community. "The Idaho Anne Frank Human Right Memorial was built as a physical statement of our shared values," the center added in another post. "One of those values includes standing up to confront hate."

Dan Prinzing, the executive director of the Wassmuth Center for Human Rights, also [told The Hill](#) that act marks "a really sad day for us." He referred to the memorial as "the heart" of Boise and divulged that the organization is questioning why "hate has become emboldened."

In a news conference Wednesday, Boise Police Chief Ryan Lee confirmed that the incident was reported Tuesday morning, [the Idaho Press reported](#). The incident, however, is believed to have occurred between Monday evening and early Tuesday morning.

"We're trying to figure out if this is something that's localized here to Boise or something that has a larger connection," Lee said, while strongly condemning the act of vandalism.

"The vandalism is absolutely reprehensible and values like hate have no place in our community, and they are not in keeping with all of the things that makes Boise the special place that it is," he noted, the Idaho Press reported.

Police also confirmed that they have launched an investigation into the incident and are reviewing surveillance video captured around the area, [KTVB reported](#).

The Wassmuth Center for Human Rights was founded in 1996. The center opened the Anne Frank Human Rights Memorial in Boise several years later in 2002.

The memorial "inspires people of all ages to contemplate the moral implications of their actions and the scope of their civic responsibilities," [according to the Wassmuth Center for Human Rights' website](#).

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Photos: France Unveils Design for Nuclear-Powered Supercarrier to Replace Aging Warship De Gaulle

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The new warship will be the largest France has ever built, just as the UK Royal Navy's new aircraft carrier, the HMS Queen Elizabeth, is its largest ever. However, Paris' newly announced carrier isn't expected to enter service for nearly 20 years.

The design for France's next aircraft carrier has been unveiled. The New Generation Aircraft Carrier (Porte Avion Nouvelle Génération, or PANG) [was announced on Tuesday by French President Emmanuel Macron](#) during a visit to nuclear reactor manufacturer Framatome.

French shipbuilder Naval Group also released concept art of the carrier, showing it to be similar in layout to [the Charles de Gaulle, France's current and only aircraft carrier](#).

"Charles de Gaulle, as you know, will come to the end of its life in 2038. This is why I have decided that the future aircraft carrier that will equip our country and our navy [will be nuclear-powered like the Charles de Gaulle.](#)" [Macron said.](#) Framatome helped build the nuclear reactors that power the de Gaulle, which was built starting in 1987 and commissioned in 2000. "Your plant in Le Creusot, which has been producing parts essential to our navy for a long time, will produce, among others, several major parts of the nuclear boiler [reactor] of the future aircraft carrier by forging and machining them right here," he added. "By these choices, we confirm France's desire to preserve its strategic autonomy."

Sporting a hard hat and mask, Macron was shown a model of the new carrier at the Framatome facility in Courbevoie, just outside Paris proper.

While Macron's announcement was short on details, France Defense Ministry Florence Parly gave some of the ship's stats in a Twitter thread later on Tuesday. She said the warship will have a displacement of roughly 75,000 tons - almost twice the size of the de Gaulle - a speed of roughly 27 knots, two K22 reactors and a complement of 2,000 sailors and 30 Future Combat Air System (Système de combat aérien du futur, [or SCAF](#)) [sixth generation fighter aircraft.](#) She gave no information about the likely assignment of unmanned aerial vehicles to the carrier.

Quelles sont ses caractéristiques ? Environ 75 000 tonnes, de l'ordre de 300m de long, une vitesse de 27 noeuds (50 km/h environ), deux chaufferies K22, des catapultes électromagnétiques, une trentaine de chasseurs SCAF et 2000 marins. Un concentré de puissance et de technologie. pic.twitter.com/Js9uQfDttF

— Florence Parly (@florence_parly) [December 8, 2020](#)

Parly said the choice of nuclear power, the only aircraft carriers that make use of which are American and French, was in part to "maintain the unique skills" of France's nuclear industry. "From a 'practical' point of view, nuclear power has two major advantages: it allows autonomy to be gained, since it does not require a supply of fuel, except for its aircraft. And it allows excellent building availability," Parly wrote. "We are acting in the long term: over the next few years we will build the nuclear propulsion systems for our" ballistic missile submarines and attack submarines. "If our engineers did not design on-board nuclear boilers for decades, we would weaken this know-how and our sovereignty."

In June, a report by French Senators Olivier Cigolotti and Gilbert Roger [that was viewed by Naval News noted](#) some additional technical details, including that the PANG will receive two electromagnetic aircraft catapults from General Atomics, which is building the EMALS systems for the US Navy's Ford-class carriers.

At present, only US and French carriers launch aircraft using catapults, [but China's new Type 002 aircraft carrier](#), presently under construction in Shanghai, will also have EMALS catapults. The rest of the world's carriers use a bow ramp to lift planes into the sky, which is safer but reduces the maximum fuel and weapons capacities on aircraft.

Naval News also reported PANG is likely to sport the French Navy's new Sea Fire multifunction 3D radar that will first be mounted on [the futuristic new Intervention and Defense Frigate](#) (Frégate de Defense et d'Intervention, or FDI) presently under construction at Naval Group's Lorient shipyard. The PANG will be built nearby, in Saint-Nazaire, Parly said.

She added that maturation of the ship's technologies will take many years, [and the Ministry of Armed Forces said the French state](#) will be investing €1 billion in the program by 2025, although it could cost some €5 billion overall.

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SpaceX's 'Starship' Rocket Prototype Explodes During Failed Vertical Landing Maneuver
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

SpaceX's prototype SN8 rocket crashed and exploded on Wednesday evening during a test flight in Texas. The rocket is intended to ferry humans to the moon and Mars one day. A Wednesday test flight of the new SN8 rocket ended disastrously when a momentary engine malfunction caused the rocket to plummet into the ground and explode.

"This suborbital flight is designed to test a number of objectives, from how the vehicle's three Raptor engines perform to the overall aerodynamic entry capabilities of the vehicle (including its body flaps) to how the vehicle manages propellant transition. SN8 will also attempt to perform a landing flip maneuver, which would be a first for a vehicle of this size," [SpaceX said in statement on its website](#) prior to the test.

The new rocket is intended to be fully reusable as opposed to partially reusable, as the company's Falcon 9 and Falcon Heavy rockets are, and to carry both cargo and passengers into space.

Earlier this year, SN5 and SN6 prototypes of the Starship rocket carried out short 500-foot test flights, but Wednesday's test was intended to reach 41,000 feet in altitude.

However, it was also intended to rotate and land upright, in the same position it as it took off. While it rotated, the rocket engine seemed to momentarily be interrupted, causing the rocket to come down much less gently than intended, and it slammed into the ground, exploding in a huge fireball.

For what it's worth, SpaceX founder Elon Musk didn't put much faith in the test, either.

"Lot of things need to go right, so maybe 1/3 chance" of success, Musk tweeted last month in response to a question about the test. "But that's why we have SN 9 & SN10" rockets, he added.

Musk seemed positive after Wednesday's crash, too.

"Successful ascent, switchover to header tanks & precise flap control to landing point!" he tweeted shortly after the explosion. "Fuel header tank pressure was low during landing burn, causing touchdown velocity to be high & RUD, but we got all the data we needed! Congrats SpaceX team hell yeah!!"

After SpaceX successfully launched astronauts into space for the first time in June, Musk pivoted the company toward developing the Starship vehicle, making it SpaceX's top priority. The rocket is intended to carry humans [not only into space, but to the moon and Mars](#).

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US House Passes Emergency One-Week Funding Measure for Federal Government

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US House of Representatives passed on Wednesday an emergency one-week extension of funding for the US federal government. The Senate will vote on the measure later this week, which will cover federal government expenses until December 18.

Lawmakers have yet to negotiate passage of a larger omnibus spending bill to fund the government into 2021, creating the need for the emergency patch-up resolution.

US President Donald Trump signed a September continuing resolution that provided funding [only until December 11, Sputnik reported](#).

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) blasted the need for a stopgap bill as "an admission of failure."

"This is something we have to do to keep the government working. But we ought not to believe or pretend or represent this is the way we ought to do business. It is not. It is a function of procrastination, a function of failing to come together and making compromises," Hoyer said on the House floor [prior to the vote, according to The Hill](#).

The negotiations over a new spending bill have taken place amid several other contentious financial debates, including the final contents of the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA - the massive bill that funds the Pentagon - and a potential COVID-19 stimulus package. Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Richard Shelby (R-AL) told reporters at the Capitol that negotiations on the omnibus bill were "probably 95%" complete. "We've got to get a deal," he said. "I think perhaps the omnibus and the COVID relief are kind of linked."

The need for a new pandemic stimulus bill has been debated for months, with Democrats [introducing a \\$2.2 trillion bill in September](#) that was a rehashed version of a bill that failed to pass in April. The present debate is over a \$908 billion relief bill that [represents extensive compromise by both Democrats and Republicans](#), but conflict remains over state and local money on the one hand and liability coverage on the other.

Trump has threatened to veto the NDAA if a provision for renaming US military installations named after Confederate leaders isn't removed, or if a provision isn't inserted to end Section 230 of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which protects internet companies from liability issues associated with content published by users on their sites. [The NDAA passed by the House on Tuesday meets neither of his demands](#).

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Biden Reportedly Considering Black Jewish 'Spy Whisperer' Darrell Blocker as CIA Chief
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The man likely to be tapped as US spy chief by presumed US President-elect Joe Biden ran the CIA's Africa office before joining a private mercenary firm. He would be the first Black person to chair the CIA and the third Jewish person to do so.

[Fox News first reported late last month](#) that Darrell Blocker, a retired 28-year CIA veteran, had emerged as a leading candidate for CIA director in a future Biden administration. However,

neither the Biden transition team nor Blocker has commented on that possibility, with Blocker noting only that Biden had come to him for advice, [according to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency \(JTA\)](#), which noted his nickname is “the spy whisperer.”

Rise to CIA Inner Circle

Blocker converted to Judaism just three years ago, but has been associated with the Jewish community since his college years. The JTA reported he closely identified with what it called “the truth-telling spies,” Joshua and Caleb, who in the Book of Exodus were the only two of the 12 sent by Moses to scout the land of Canaan prior to the Hebrews’ arrival to give an optimistic report about their chances of success if they settled there.

Blocker’s father was in the US Air Force until Blocker was 11, when the family settled in Augusta, Georgia. Blocker studied at the University of Georgia, where he found Judaism could answer many of his questions that Christianity could not. After, he joined the Air Force himself, becoming an analyst for four years from 1987 to 1990 and being awarded the Distinguished Career Intelligence Medal. He applied for a job at the CIA in 1989. He told the JTA his entrance essay gave a grim estimation of success for the First Intifada, a Palestinian mass-uprising against Israeli occupation then underway.

“It was the Intifada, so of course I wrote about that,” he told JTA. “And mostly along the lines of every nation in history that has fought and won actual territory, actual ground, them giving it back - it just hasn’t happened.”

According to JTA, Blocker served in 10 countries in the CIA, including Senegal, Uganda and Pakistan, eventually becoming chief of station for the CIA’s Africa Division. While on station in Uganda in the 1990s, his musical skills made him a local celebrity. He spent his final nine years with the agency as an executive in the Senior Intelligence Service, the CIA’s global leadership team, and is known in the intelligence community as the “spy whisperer.”

From Spy to Mercenary

[According to his LinkedIn profile](#), Blocker left the CIA in 2018, becoming national security program manager at [Counter-Terrorism Watch, which provides training and advice](#) to police forces and a contributor to ABC News shortly after.

Last year, Blocker became Chief Operating Officer at Multi Operational Security Agency Intelligence Company (MOSAIC), a private security contractor run by Tony Schiena, a former South African spy [billed by the UK Telegraph as “the world’s most highly trained covert operative.”](#)

A 2014 Vice documentary on private militaries called “Superpower for Hire” focused on MOSAIC’s work in Venezuela running security for an elite client: Paolo Fidanzo (billed as Pablo in the film), a tech entrepreneur who founded MO Technologies, which is headquartered in Bogota, Colombia, and Miami, Florida.

Biden’s Other Options

Biden’s team is purporting itself to be forming a government that “looks like America,” and many of his picks so far have been demographic firsts in their positions, including [Avril Haines, a former CIA deputy director](#) who Biden wants to be the first female US director of national intelligence, and [Gen. Lloyd Austin, a Raytheon board member](#) and former commander of US Central Command who Biden wants to be the first Black secretary of defense. Blocker would be the CIA’s first Black director and its third Jewish director, if he were posted to the position.

Blocker isn't the only person rumored to be under consideration for the position of CIA director, though. [Politico reported that Tom Donilon](#), who served as White House national security adviser from 2010 to 2013 - when Biden was US vice president under Barack Obama - and Jeh Johnson, who ran the Department of Homeland Security under Obama, were also being considered.

Another name that has come up is Michael Morell, who was acting CIA director in 2011 and again from 2012 to 2013, but leading Democrats in the Senate have said they would oppose Morell's nomination [because of his denial of the CIA's torture program](#) and claims that so-called "enhanced interrogation techniques" are not torture.

Blocker's thoughts on enhanced interrogation are not known. However, comments by him about some of the CIA's other ignominious activities suggest he would take a detached approach.

'All Of That Happened 40 Years Ago'

During [a 2019 Q&A with a prominent Los Angeles luxury real estate broker](#), Blocker told a story about how he was challenged on the CIA's record by a student during [a recruitment fair at Norfolk State University](#), a historically Black college in southern Virginia.

"He walks up and he looks at me, and he's like, 'How can you work for them? Do you know that they did experiments on Black soldiers?' And I said, 'Yup. And [we tried to kill \[Cuban leader Fidel\] Castro](#), and we mined the harbors of Nicaragua.' I said, 'All of that happened 40 years ago. If you want to talk about 40 years ago I can talk history with you, but if you want to talk about the options that you have within the CIA, which are amazing - listen, it's the best life you're ever going to live.'"

He then said he told the student the one thing he wanted from a CIA recruit was integrity. "But don't you guys lie, cheat and steal?" the student asked him, the same description of the agency given by [US Secretary of State and former CIA Director Mike Pompeo](#) earlier this year. "And I said, 'Yes, but never to each other and never against US interests,'" Blocker recalled.

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Chinese Defense Ministry Denounces Potential \$280 Million US Military Sale to Taiwan by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

After news of yet another potential weapons sale from the United States to Taiwan, China's Defense Ministry warned the US the move could only further damage relations between Washington and Beijing.

"China firmly opposes US arms sales to Taiwan and urges the US to immediately cancel the projects of selling weapons to Taiwan," Senior Colonel Ren Guoqiang, spokesperson for China's Ministry of National Defense (MND), said Tuesday, [according to People's Liberation Army news site China Military](#).

"The move has seriously undermined the relations between the two countries and the two militaries, as well as the peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. China is strongly dissatisfied with and firmly opposed to this," Ren said. "Any attempt of using Taiwan to contain China by the US is doomed to failure."

"China strongly urges the US to abide by the one-China principle and the three China-US Joint Communiqués, immediately cancel the relevant arms sales to Taiwan and cease military contacts with the island, so as to avoid further damage to the peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and to the relations between the two countries and two militaries," Ren continued. [On Monday, the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency \(DSCA\)](#) announced the US State Department had approved the possible sale of \$280 million worth of army communications equipment to Taiwan. The deal will still have to be approved by Congress and by the Taiwanese parliament, but such deals are typically passed once the State Department signs off on them. The potential sale is just the latest brought forward in Washington in recent months. Other recently approved sales include [\\$600 million in MQ-9 Reaper drones](#); \$2.37 billion in [Harpoon Coastal Defense Systems](#) and related equipment; \$1 billion in AGM-84H [Standoff Land Attack Missile Expanded Response \(SLAM-ER\)](#) long-range cruise missiles; \$436 million in HIMARS rocket artillery and weapons; [and an \\$8 billion sale of F-16V "Viper" fighter jets](#) that was finalized in August.

Song Zhongping, a Chinese mainland [military expert and TV commentator](#), [told the Global Times](#) that Taiwanese forces using US-made command and control equipment means they will become integrated into the US' chain of command, becoming fully reliant on them.

Speaking on Tuesday about the deal, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing Wen said that "authoritarian forces consistently attempt to violate the existing norms-based order. Taiwan has been at the receiving end of such [military threats on a daily basis](#)," [Reuters reported](#).

Beijing regards Taiwan as a part of China and a province in rebellion and states like the US as interfering in internal Chinese affairs by aiding Taipei. The autonomous island is governed by the Republic of China, which was defeated on the mainland at the conclusion of the civil war in 1949 and the declaration of a People's Republic of China in Beijing. When the US finally switched its recognition of the legitimate Chinese government from Taipei to Beijing thirty years later in 1979, it agreed with this principle of "One China."

Relations between Taipei and Beijing have rarely been friendly, but since Tsai became Taiwanese president in 2016 and Donald Trump became US president in 2017, [tensions have taken a turn for the worse, with fears Taiwan](#) may soon declare itself an independent state. Chinese President Xi Jinping has promised if that happens, there will be war.

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Federal Trade Commission, Over 40 US States File Antitrust Lawsuits Against Facebook
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Tech giant Facebook has faced an increasing amount of scrutiny around its handling of user data and competition practices since 2017, with matters intensifying even further when it came under fire by the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) last year on antitrust grounds. The [FTC](#) and a [coalition of attorneys general](#) representing 46 states, the District of Columbia and Guam filed twin lawsuits on Wednesday against Facebook, alleging that the social media company has engaged in anticompetitive practices.

New York Attorney General Letitia James, who is leading the coalition, [said during a news conference announcing the move](#) that "any efforts to stifle competition, hurt small business, reduce innovation and creativity, cut privacy protections, will be met with full force of our offices."

"For nearly a decade Facebook has used its dominance and monopoly power to crush smaller rivals and snuff out competition, all at the expense of everyday users," James added.

The pair of complaints zero in on Facebook's acquisition of and control over popular photo-sharing app Instagram and messaging platform WhatsApp.

The states' lawsuit specifically alleges that the purchases of both platforms were done illegally and asks the court to bar Facebook from making anymore buys worth over \$10 million for the duration of the case.

As for the FTC, a [release from the agency](#) states that it is seeking a permanent injunction that would "require divestitures of assets, including Instagram and WhatsApp; prohibit Facebook from imposing anticompetitive conditions on software developers; and require Facebook to seek prior notice and approval for future mergers and acquisitions."

The FTC alleges that when Facebook executives, including CEO Mark Zuckerberg, realized that Instagram was an "existential threat to Facebook's monopoly power," the company chose to buy the platform for \$1 billion in 2012 "rather than compete with it." Similar allegations were made in regards to the 2014 purchase of WhatsApp.

Facebook has [responded to the development](#), writing in a post that its "reviewing the complaints & will have more to say soon."

"Years after the FTC cleared our acquisitions, the government now wants a do-over with no regard for the impact that precedent would have on the broader business community or the people who choose our products every day," it added.

Earlier this year, an [antitrust subcommittee hearing](#) held by the US House of Representative revealed emails in which Zuckerberg characterized his interest in buying Instagram as a way to neutralize a competitor and improve the Facebook platform.

The Wednesday legal action marks Facebook as the second tech company to be taken to court by state governments and a federal agency over antitrust allegations this year. In October, the US Department of Justice along with 11 state attorneys general [filed an antitrust lawsuit against Google](#), alleging that it had stifled competition to maintain its position as a top search engine.

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YouTube to Remove Videos Alleging Widespread Voter Fraud Weeks After US Election
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The latest move by video-sharing platform YouTube may soon see the tech giant come under fire by US President Donald Trump and Republican allies, as the commander-in-chief has refused to concede the 2020 election, instead opting to further promote allegations of voter fraud.

YouTube announced Wednesday that it will begin the process of removing content from its platform that alleges widespread voter fraud helped to influence the outcome of the highly contested US presidential election.

The [company explained in a blog post](#) that the changes would be effective immediately, and that it would push the measures into full gear “in the weeks to come.” The new policy isn’t likely to affect videos that were posted in the weeks prior to its enactment.

“We will start removing any piece of content uploaded today (or anytime after) that misleads people by alleging that widespread fraud or errors changed the outcome of the 2020 US presidential election,” reads the update. “For example, we will remove videos claiming that a presidential candidate won the election due to widespread software glitches or counting errors.” “As always, news coverage and commentary on these issues can remain on our site if there’s sufficient education, documentary, scientific or artistic context,” the notice adds.

YouTube indicated that it would begin to impose the new policy since the national safe harbor deadline for states to wrap up any election-related disputes, such as recounts and audits, was on Tuesday. Additionally, the platform explained the decision was made because enough US states have certified their election results to determine a winner.

“Our main goal going into the election season was to make sure we’re connecting people with authoritative information, while also limiting the reach of misinformation and removing harmful content,” the post states.

Although YouTube has stated it terminated over 8,000 channels and “thousands of harmful and misleading election-related videos,” the company has largely remained under fire by consumers for taking a much more hands-off approach when allowing election misinformation content to thrive on its platform.

Rather than removing videos outright, YouTube in recent months has instead flagged election content with labels that direct viewers to what the company refers to as “authoritative news sources,” such as CBS News or ABC News, among other mainstream media outlets.

In late November, a group of Democratic congressional lawmakers [addressed a letter to Susan Wojcicki](#), YouTube’s chief executive officer, and called on the company to take a more hard-line stance and remove all election misinformation footage.

“These videos seek to undermine our democracy and cast doubt on the legitimacy of President-elect Biden’s incoming administration,” the letter reads. “Moreover, because the current president has not committed to a peaceful transition of power, misinformation and manipulated media content on your platform may fuel civil unrest.”

However, while Democrats are likely to praise YouTube’s new path, the move probably won’t give a comforting feeling to Republicans. In fact, Trump ally US Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO) [voiced his dissatisfaction via Twitter](#), writing that YouTube was infringing on users’ free speech. “If you have concerns about election integrity, you must sit down and shut up,” Hawley tweeted before echoing earlier remarks by Trump to revoke Section 230, a decades-old piece of law that shields online companies from being held liable for content posted by their users.

Having refused to concede the US election, Trump has vowed to continue with his legal challenges and most recently confirmed that [he will join Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton’s efforts](#) to reverse the election results through the US Supreme Court.

Although the nation’s highest court has not indicated whether it will take the case, critics have written the move off as a publicity stunt.

YouTube's announcement comes as its parent company [Google said it would begin lifting on Thursday its temporary pause](#) on political advertising. Google had issued the momentary halt in an effort to prevent potential exploitation or misinformation through advertising, as the company had expected election results would be delayed.

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Kobe Bryant, US Election & COVID-19 Round Out Google's Top Global Searches for 2020 by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Google's newly released top searches for the year are not necessarily based on the most-searched phrases, but instead focus on words that maintained high spikes over a period of time throughout 2020 when compared to the previous year.

Google released its [catalog of top trending searches for 2020](#) on Wednesday, revealing that all things COVID-19, remote work and the US election topped the search engine's end-of-the-year list.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it's no surprise that "coronavirus" was the top global search for the year, with "election results" following close behind. In fact, COVID-19-related phrases took three of the top 10 spots as users searched for updates and information on the respiratory disease's symptoms.

The top "news" searches were, of course, coronavirus, election results, Iran, Beirut and the hantavirus, a family of viruses that are spread by rodents and have a mortality rate of 38%, according to the [US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). In fact, reports emerged Tuesday that a [Nevada resident had died](#) after contracting one such virus.

The top five people that were searched for were, in order, projected US President-elect Joe Biden, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Biden's running mate US Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) and actor Tom Hanks, the latter likely because he was the first big-name celebrity to [contract COVID-19 early on during the pandemic](#).

Legendary basketball player Kobe Bryant, who died in January in a helicopter crash in California, was the third-most-popular search; however, his name ranked number one under Google's subset "Loss" list. Actors [Naya Rivera](#), [Chadwick Boseman](#), and [Sushant Singh Rajput](#) and Minnesota resident [George Floyd](#) rounded out the remainder of the list.

Under the top 10 TV shows in the US, streaming giant Netflix took the cake with its nine listed series that included "Tiger King," "The Umbrella Academy," "Ozark" and newly released "The Queen's Gambit," among other series.

In light of lockdowns implemented across the US and salons being shuttered for extended periods of time, the [most-searched questions in the US](#) under the beauty "how to" list included questions on cutting men's hair at home, coloring one's hair, styling curtain bangs and even how to best wash one's hands.

With musicians Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's hit "WAP" earning [more than 90 million streams](#) in the week after its release in August, it's also no surprise the song's title was the

number one most-searched in the US under Google's definition's list. It was followed by "entanglement," "antebellum," "pandemic" and "asymptomatic."

The word "entanglement" ended up on the list after actress Jada Pinkett-Smith admitted in July to having a romantic relationship with singer August Alsina. At the time, Pinkett-Smith was separated from husband Will Smith, and rather than referring to the relationship as an affair of sorts, she instead described it as an "entanglement."

Elsewhere, users within the US searched for nearby COVID-19 testing sites, voting polls, wildfires that were ravaging much of the country's West Coast and protests that were being held.

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Americans Suffering From Bleeding Hands Over Constant Handwashing Amid Pandemic - Survey

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has reiterated the importance of washing one's hands, underscoring that individuals needed to wash with soap or hand sanitizer for at least 20 seconds in order to help curb the deadly virus' spread.

A new survey released by marketing research company OnePoll has determined that about 1 in 5 Americans are cleaning their hands so often since the start of the pandemic that their hands have bled due to the cleansing routine.

Commissioned by hand sanitizer company Muse Health, the survey polled approximately 2,000 Americans on their daily handwashing practices and looked into how individuals have changed their measures after certain activities, such as shopping for groceries and using door handles, amid the pandemic.

The survey determined that the average American washes their hands about 10 times a day, and that they also use hand sanitizer on an additional eight occasions - two practices which make it not entirely surprising that more than half of those surveyed said their hands have become much drier over the last several months.

Some 57% of respondents also indicated that they only used hand sanitizer after touching shopping carts, car doors, turnstiles or door handles, among other public surfaces; however, some 22% noted that regardless of whether the surface is public, they're lathering on their alcohol-based cleanser.

Early on in the pandemic, the CDC released alerts that urged individuals to thoroughly wash their hands for a period of at least 20 seconds, noting that not only do one's palms need to be cleaned, but that also the backs of one's hands, fingernails and the skin between fingers need to be washed.

At one point, health experts [recommended singing a song](#), like "Happy Birthday," to ensure that one was washing their hands for an acceptable amount of time - not just a quick rinse before hopping back to business.

With the CDC advisory in mind, the survey found that the majority of the respondents did agree that they were washing their hands much more often this year than they had ever before. Sixty-four percent of the group described the pandemic as turning them into “a bit of a germaphobe.”

“While it might feel like it’s become second nature by now, continuing to be vigilant about keeping hands clean across a variety of contexts – from home to work to the grocery store and beyond – will be imperative to curtailing the pandemic this cold and flu season,” Bruce Albert, chief science officer of Muse Health, said in a [statement to Study Finds](#).

Albert further noted that while many are quick to grab their bottle of sanitizer, consumers need to select supplies that have “moisturizing agents like vitamin E, lime oil or glycerin” to prevent dry skin, which is an objective of Muse Health’s products.

The [American Academy of Dermatology Association has suggested](#) that when going through their handwashing routine, individuals can leave their hands slightly damp after drying, at which time they can hydrate their skin by applying a moisturizer.

The association strongly warns against using scented moisturizers, as they can allow skin to become even more irritated.

Incidentally, [an August OnePoll survey](#) that polled 2,000 British adults found that while the majority of participants agreed they noticed a stark increase in their handwashing, a concerning 12% of individuals stated that they didn’t wash after using a public or private bathroom.

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US Judge Rejects Third 'Kraken' Lawsuit Seeking to Invalidate Votes in Arizona - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - A US judge has rejected pro-Trump lawyer Sidney Powell's third lawsuit seeking to overturn President-elect Joe Biden's victory in the battleground state of Arizona, a court document revealed.

"Allegations that find favor in the public sphere of gossip and innuendo cannot be a substitute for earnest pleadings and procedure in federal court," judge Diane Humetewa wrote in the court document on Wednesday. "They most certainly cannot be the basis for upending Arizona's 2020 General Election. The Court is left with no alternative but to dismiss this matter in its entirety." Earlier this week, Powell's legal challenges in the swing states of Georgia and Michigan were dismissed.

Another key decision is expected out of the Supreme Court soon over the state of Texas' lawsuit that aims to block Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin from taking part in the electoral college.

The Trump campaign and the Republican party have lost 54 of 55 post-election lawsuits challenging Biden's victory in key battleground states, according to a tally by Democracy Docket, a legal and voting rights advocacy group.

Following the presidential election on November 3, US President Donald Trump has been insisting that widespread voter fraud took place.

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Facebook Confident It Can Prevail Over US Government Anti-Trust Actions - General Counsel

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - Facebook is confident it can overcome the anti-trust lawsuits filed by the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and 48 states, Vice President and General Counsel Jennifer Newstead said in a statement.

Earlier on Wednesday, the FTC said it sued Facebook over alleged anti-competitive practices and is seeking to require divestitures of the company's assets, including Instagram and WhatsApp. In addition, a 48-state coalition filed a similar anti-trust lawsuit against the social media giant.

"We look forward to our day in court, when we're confident the evidence will show that Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp belong together, competing on the merits with great products," Newstead said on Wednesday.

The company said the FTC lawsuit risks creating doubt in the federal government's merger review process.

The FTC lawsuit also aims to prohibit Facebook from imposing anticompetitive conditions on software developers and requires Facebook to seek prior notice and approval for future mergers and acquisitions.

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US May Return to Normality by End of 2021 - Fauci

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The United States may be able to enjoy a relatively full return to pre-coronavirus normality by the end of 2021 if the new vaccines prove as effective as hoped for, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) Director Anthony Fauci said in a podcast.

"I believe if we do it efficiently enough over the second quarter of 2021, by the third quarter we might have enough herd immunity protecting our society that by the end of 2021, we could be close to the degree of normality that we had before," Fauci said.

However, Fauci warned if more than half of the US public refused to trust and take the new vaccines, the pandemic could last much longer and not be isolated.

"If only 40 or 50 percent of people are willing to get vaccinated, it's going to take quite a while to reach herd immunity," he said.

Recent polls indicate that around 25 percent of US adults are undecided about using the new vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna while another 25 percent outright say they will refuse to do so.

On Tuesday, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said in a briefing document that there are 20 possible side effects from taking the new vaccines, including stroke, heart attack, meningitis,

encephalitis, autoimmune diseases, narcolepsy and others. The FDA also said that six people have died during trials testing Pfizer's vaccine.

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US Justice Dept. Probing Hunter Biden China Business Dealings - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department's tax investigation on Hunter Biden, President-elect Joe Biden's son, is also connected to his business dealings in China, Fox News reported citing a government source.

The report said on Wednesday that the investigation was predicated partly due to suspicious foreign transactions from China and other foreign countries.

Joe Biden is currently not a subject in the grand jury investigation, the report said citing the source. The report noted that the investigation began in 2018.

Earlier on Wednesday, Hunter Biden released a statement disclosing that the US Attorney's Office in Delaware is investigating his tax affairs and that he is confident the probe will show he handled them legally.

Hunter Biden has been accused of using his father's position as vice president to make deals with the Ukraine, Chinese and other authorities and businesses. The Bidens have denied any wrongdoing.

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Pennsylvania Governor Wolf Tests Positive for Coronavirus - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf announced in a statement that he has tested positive for the novel coronavirus and has isolated along with his wife in line with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) health guidelines.

"During a routine test [on Monday], I tested positive for COVID-19. I have no symptoms and am feeling well and I am in isolation at home," Wolf said in a Twitter on Tuesday evening. Wold said he is following CDC and Department of Health guidelines and is quarantining at home in the town of York

At least five other sitting governors in the United States have tested positive for the novel coronavirus, including in Oklahoma, Missouri, Virginia, Nevada and Colorado.

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US Senate Fails to Pass Measure to Block F-35s Sale to UAE

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The US Senate has failed to pass a measure that would have blocked the arms sale of 50 F-35 fighter jets to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). On Wednesday afternoon, the Senate voted 47-49, falling short of the majority needed to pass the legislation.

Earlier in the day, the Senate also failed to pass a second measure that would have blocked the sale of 18 Reaper drones to the UAE.

President Donald Trump had vowed to veto the legislation intending to block the \$23 billion arms sales to the UAE.

In October, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Benny Gantz announced in a statement that Israel had withdrawn its objections against the United States' sale of F-35 jets to UAE after Jerusalem secured guarantees that its qualitative military edge in the Middle East will be maintained.

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IMF Board Approves \$49M In Disbursement to Protect Guinea From Downside COVID-19 Risks

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - Guinea will receive an additional \$49.47 million from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), bringing the total amount of loans received during the coronavirus pandemic to slightly more than \$166 million, the IMF Executive Board said in a press release.

"While performance under the Fund-supported program remains broadly satisfactory, Guinea faces significant downside risks related to COVID-19 pandemic," the release said on Wednesday.

With the latest disbursement, Guinea will reach 56 percent of its borrowing quota from the IMF's Extended Credit Facility (ECF), the release said.

The IMF projected 5.2 percent economic growth this year due to a "buoyant mining sector," even as the COVID-19 restrictive measures hit the non-mining economy by lowering annual growth to 2.4 percent, about half the pre-pandemic level.

The IMF relaxed requirements earlier in the year, allowing Guinea to borrow from the nation's central bank to fund its coronavirus response, the release said.

However, the IMF release credited Guinea's 2021 draft budget with properly supporting post-pandemic recovery while allowing the nation to continue servicing its debt, the release added.

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Boeing Trains Air Carriers on Safe COVID-19 Vaccines Transport Using Dry Ice - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - Airline manufacturer Boeing said in a press release that it is partnering with air carriers and regulators to ensure the safe transport of coronavirus vaccines that require storage in extreme cold.

"Boeing has issued service letters, multi-operator messages and has held online symposiums to communicate the issues associated with dry ice carriage. The published materials include data 'curves' reflecting how many pounds of dry ice can be carried by each airplane model based on the sublimation [vaporization] rate of the dry ice as packaged for shipment)," the release said on Wednesday.

Boeing also says that the documentation covers important airplane operational information such as airflow settings and dispatching under the Minimum Equipment List conditions.

The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which awaits emergency use authorization from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), needs to be stored and transported at temperatures of minus 94 Fahrenheit, a requirement that can most readily be met with dry ice. A second vaccine by Moderna, which also expects FDA approval within weeks, can be stored in a standard freezer, according to data from the manufacturer.

Boeing provided carriers with data on dry ice carriage for all the company's aircraft, the release said.

Boeing is also partnering with the Federal Aviation Administration and other regulators and industry organizations to share information on aircraft capacity and to develop additional safety-related guidance, the release added.

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Russian Church Abroad Yet to Schedule Centennial Events Due to COVID-19 - First Hierarch

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The Russian Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) has yet to decide on the schedule for celebrations of its 100-year anniversary and pilgrimages to the Kursk Root icon of the Mother of God, ROCOR First Hierarch metropolitan Hilarion (Kapral) told Sputnik.

"We cannot discuss the specific plans of celebrations because various events have been postponed," the metropolitan said, noting that all of this year's events had initially been scheduled.

The church had plans to go to Serbia where ROCOR had arisen in 1920, he said.

"However, we are not certain about that, as the COVID-19 made us lessen the degree of danger," Hilarion said. "We just have to wait and see."

In the meantime, local celebrations will be taking place in the United States and other countries, he added.

"At the end of the year, we will hold a St. Herman of Alaska conference for youth on Zoom, and plan to serve a Divine Liturgy on December 25, so our young members could watch it and participate through the Internet," the metropolitan noted.

The First Hierarch assured that the ROCOR plans to resume pilgrimages of the Kursk Root icon to Russia as soon as possible. The major relic of the Russian Orthodox diaspora visited Russia annually since 2009, but the pandemic made it impossible in 2020.

"Certainly, once there is no danger to the health of people who come to the church in such large crowds to venerate the icon, we will resume these pilgrimages to Russia," metropolitan said.

In the meantime, he added, many parishes in the US that rarely get to see the icon or never saw it, were visited by the relic.

"There is a way that the icon always visits the faithful," he said.

The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic on March 11. To date, more than 68 million people have been infected with the coronavirus worldwide, with over 1.5 million fatalities, according to Johns Hopkins University (JHU).

The United States remains the worst-hit nation both in terms of the number of cases (over 15 million) and fatalities (more than 287,000).

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US Cryptocurrency Creator Faces Criminal Tax Evasion Charges - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The United States has unsealed an indictment against Amir Elmaani, who created the cryptocurrency Oyster Pear, with tax evasion, the Justice Department said.

"As alleged, Amir Bruno Elmaani purported to establish a high-tech method of financing a high-tech business, but the underlying scheme was old-fashioned fraud and tax evasion," acting US Attorney for the New York City borough of Manhattan Audrey Strauss said in the release on Wednesday.

Strauss said Elmaani allegedly generated millions by soliciting investor money through his own cryptocurrency, adding to the purportedly fixed number of tokens and converting them to other cryptocurrencies, and failing to report or pay tax on any of the proceeds.

Strauss also said Elmaani filed a false 2017 tax return stating that he had only approximately \$15,000 of income from a "patent design" business, filed no return and reported no income to the Internal Revenue Service in 2018.

Nevertheless, he spent in 2018 more than \$10 million for the purchase of multiple yachts, \$1.6 million at a carbon fiber composite company, hundreds of thousands of dollars at a home improvement store and more than \$700,000 for the purchase of two homes, the release said. Elmaani obtained the money through online sales of his cryptocurrency product, the release added.

Elmaani is charged with two counts of tax evasion, each of which carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison, according to the release.

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US Space Force Gets 5,700 New Personnel From Air Force in 6 Months - Deputy Defense Chief

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - A total of 5,700 US Air Force personnel have already transferred to the new Space Force or are in the process of doing so over the current six month period, Deputy Secretary of Defense David Norquist told the eighth National Space Council meeting at Cape Canaveral in Florida.

"Two thousand, three hundred [personnel] have transferred from the Air Force into the Space Force over the last three months [and] an additional 3,000 will transfer over the next three months, we anticipate," Norquist said on Wednesday.

The Space Force was growing at a rapid rate and now included three field commands as well as entities for space and electronic warfare and space domain awareness, Norquist said.

The United Kingdom had launched its own Space Command in November, Norquist recalled while France, another major US ally in Europe was upgrading its space forces too, he said.

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US Army Deploys 45 Medical Specialists to Battle COVID-19 in 4 Hospitals - NORTHCOM

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - A US Army medical team consisting of 45 soldiers will deploy to the state of Wisconsin this week to support federal and state efforts to treat COVID-19 victims, US Northern Command (NORTHCOM) said in a press release.

"The military medical personnel, part of two Urban Augmentation Medical Task Forces, will come from several locations and support four hospitals across the state," the release on Wednesday.

One team consists of personnel from the 531st Hospital Center in the US state of Kentucky, while the other is comprised primarily of personnel from US Army Medical Command in Texas, the release said.

The personnel will support Medical Centers in the Wisconsin cities of Marshfield, Eau Claire, Beaver Dam and Rice Lake, the release added.

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US Space Companies Secured Nearly \$6Bln in New Investments in Q3 - Commerce Secretary

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - Almost \$6 billion had been invested in the global space industry in the third quarter of 2020, making a total of \$17.5 billion for the first nine months of the year, Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross said at a space council meeting.

"[Some] \$5.9 billion was invested in space companies in the third quarter of this year [and] \$17.5 billion was invested in the space industry in the first three quarters of this year with 62 percent of it coming to US companies," Ross said on Wednesday.

Globally, the annual revenue generated by the space industry may top \$1 trillion by 2040, Ross said. He also said the number of space satellites to perform both military and commercial missions was growing at a faster rate than ever before.

"The non-profit Space Foundation estimates that the global space economy exceeded \$423 billion in 2019, with nearly 80 percent of that total representing commercial space activity... Multiple investment banks have forecast that the global space economy will surpass \$1 trillion by 2040," he said

The number of new satellites in orbit is expected to increase by 50 percent to 1,050 in the next few months while over the rest of this decade, a total of 1,200 new satellites are currently projected to be launched into space, Ross added.

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Trump Joins Texas in US Supreme Court Bid to Overturn Election Results

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump joined the lawsuit filed by Texas in the country's Supreme Court in a bid to overturn President-elect Joe Biden's victory in four states, according to a court filing.

"Donald J. Trump, President of the United States, respectfully seeks leave to intervene in the pending original jurisdiction matter... Plaintiff in Intervention seeks leave to file the accompanying Bill of Complaint in Intervention against the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the States of Georgia, Michigan, and Wisconsin... challenging their administration of the 2020 presidential election," the document said.

Together with Texas, Trump requests that the Supreme Court bars "the Defendant States," which effectively ensured Biden's win in the presidential race, from using their current voting results to appoint the slate of representatives to the Electoral College.

On Wednesday, 17 states submitted a brief to the US Supreme Court in support of the Texas' lawsuit as "amici curiae" - without formally joining the bid.

Trump has said he won the election but victory was snatched from him via massive election and voter fraud and acts of impropriety. Trump has sought recounts in several states and filed lawsuits in state and federal courts to seek relief.

Several of the states sued by Texas have said they did not find evidence of widespread fraud or substantial irregularities.

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US Developing New Nuclear Systems to Power Space Missions, New Bases - Energy Chief

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The United States is developing different versions of nuclear power to use on lunar and other space bases and for long range interplanetary manned and unmanned probes, Secretary of Energy Dan Brouillette told the National Space Council.

"We will continue to develop surface fission power, thermal nuclear propulsion technologies and advanced nuclear fuel production capabilities," Brouillette said on Wednesday.

The Energy Department had created closer ties than ever before with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to empower and speed up its programs, Brouillette said.

The department was also "ramping up" Uranium isotope-238 production thus clearing a production bottleneck and making possible "quicker mission tempos" to launch more deep space, interplanetary missions through the Solar System through the 2020s, Brouillette continued.

The Energy Department had also already drawn up a new space strategy for the next ten years to support the space missions of NASA and other government agencies. However, it had not been published yet, Brouillette said.

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Hunter Biden Says US Attorney in Delaware Investigating His Tax Affairs - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - Hunter Biden, son of President-elect Joe Biden, said in a statement that the US Attorney's Office in the state of Delaware is investigating his tax affairs. "I learned yesterday for the first time that the US Attorney's Office in Delaware advised my legal counsel, also yesterday, that they are investigating my tax affairs," Hunter Biden said in the statement on Wednesday.

Hunter Biden said he is confident the review into his tax affairs will show he handled his them legally and appropriately.

Hunter Biden has been accused of using his father's position as vice president to make deals with the Ukraine, Chinese and other authorities and businesses. The Bidens have denied any wrongdoing.

Earlier this month, Joe Biden said his family will not engage in any business that could interfere with the United States' affairs.

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US House Passes Measure to Extend Federal Spending for 1 Week

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives has passed a measure for a one-week extension on federal spending to keep the government open through December 18 as negotiations for a 2021 spending bill continue.

The measure passed on Wednesday evening with a 343-67 vote, sending the measure to the US Senate for consideration.

The federal government funding is set to expire on Friday.

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US Files USMCA Complaint to Challenge Canada Dairy Tariff Rate Quotas

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The United States has filed a complaint under the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) alleging that Canadian dairy import allocations contravene the accord, US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer said.

"Canada's measures violate its commitments and harm US dairy farmers and producers. We are disappointed that Canada's policies have made this first ever enforcement action under the USMCA necessary to ensure compliance with the agreement," Lighthizer said on Wednesday. The United States alleging that Canadian dairy tariffs rate quotas (TRQs) - allocations for duty-free imports - were reserved for domestic processors, which would undermine the ability of US dairy farmers to export a wide variety of their products north of the border. The office of Mary Ng, Canada's Minister of Small Business, Export Promotion and International Trade, did not immediately respond Sputnik's request for comment. The US dairy industry has decried Canada's allocation of TRQs, saying that it fell well short of what was negotiated in the USMCA, which was signed into law earlier this year.

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US Neo-Nazi Gets 16-Month Prison Term for Threats Against Journalists - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The US sentenced Atomwaffen Neo-Nazi group member Johnny Garza to 16 months in prison for a plot to threaten reporters and activists, the Justice Department said in a statement.

"Garza is one of four men indicted in February 2020 for their plot to deliver threatening posters to journalists and advocates for minority groups," the release said on Wednesday.

Garza's crimes included threats against a Jewish journalist and participation in a plot to intimidate reporters and advocates who worked to expose anti-Semitism in the US, Assistant Attorney General for the department's Civil Rights Division explained in the release.

In his plea agreement, Garza, 21, admitted that he conspired with the other defendants via an encrypted online chat group to identify journalists and advocates to threaten in retaliation for the victims' work exposing anti-Semitism, the release said.

Defendant Taylor Parker-Dipeppe, 21, pleaded guilty in September 2020 and is scheduled for sentencing on February 24, 2021. The two leaders of the conspiracy, Kaleb Cole and Cameron Brandon Shea, are scheduled for trial on March 22, 2021, according to the release.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik)

DENMARK-RUSSIA ESPIONAGE CASE

- * Danish prosecutors have charged with espionage a Russian citizen residing in the country, Reuters reported on Wednesday, citing the public prosecutor.
- * The Russian embassy in Denmark told Sputnik that it qualifies as a mistake the espionage charges against the Russian national and hopes he will be exculpated and released.
- * Moscow considers the accusations against the Russian national to be groundless and resembling a witch hunt, spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry Maria Zakharova said.

US SUES FACEBOOK

- * The US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has sued Facebook in an effort to block the company's anti-competitive practices and force it to divest its interests in Instagram and WhatsApp, the FTC said in a statement on Wednesday.
- * A coalition of 48 states has launched an anti-trust lawsuit against Facebook alleging that the company continues to stifle competition and protect its monopoly power, New York Attorney General Letita James said.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

- * Canadian health regulators have approved the Pfizer and BioNTech coronavirus vaccine, Health Canada said on Wednesday.
- * Russian coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V has become the target of information attacks in Russia and abroad for competitive or political reasons, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) said.

US ENVOY FOR SYRIA CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

- * The United States plans to extend its Caesar Act sanctions to individuals and entities outside Syria, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Joel Rayburn said during a Congressional hearing on Wednesday.

* The United States may sanction Russia over the ongoing conflict in Syria, Rayburn said.

INTERNATIONAL DISCUSSIONS ON DONBAS

* Russia is concerned by the leniency that Berlin and Paris demonstrate toward Kiev's destructive policy on Donbas, spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry Maria Zakharova said Wednesday.

* The French Foreign Ministry notes "significant progress" on agreements on Donbas a year after the summit of the leaders of the Normandy Four countries in Paris, pointing, in particular, to the observance of the ceasefire regime in the region.

* Leaders of EU member states will discuss Minsk agreements on east Ukraine settlement at the upcoming summit as well as whether to extend sanctions against Russia, an EU source told reporters.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH CEASEFIRE

* The OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs are expected to visit the Nagorno-Karabakh region soon and clarify some elements of the ceasefire agreement, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said on Wednesday.

* The Russia-mediated talks on the demarcation of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border may start this year, Armenian Deputy Prime Minister Tigran Avinyan said.

* Demining specialists have cleared more than half of the town of Stepanakert and nearby areas from potentially explosive items in the past few weeks, and the town is expected to be free of explosives by the end of the year, the head of the Nagorno-Karabakh demining center, Samvel Mesropyan, told Sputnik.

PUTIN ON RUSSIAN ECONOMY

* Russian President Vladimir Putin said Wednesday, at a meeting on the economy, he was surprised at a sharp increase in prices for some widespread food, such as sugar, flour, sunflower oil.

* Unemployment in Russia is decreasing too slowly, it is not enough for a real change, Putin said.

* The inflation rising above the target set by the Bank of Russia has been caused by several objective factors, Putin said.

* Putin said it was important to make sure not only to have enough food on the internal market but to make it affordable.

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US FTC, States Sue Facebook to Require Divestitures of Instagram, WhatsApp

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Trade Commission on Wednesday sued Facebook for anti-competitive practices, demanding it divest its interests in Instagram and WhatsApp, while a coalition of 48 states filed another action that collectively posed the biggest challenge in the social media giant's 16-year history.

"The FTC is seeking a permanent injunction in federal court that could, among other things: require divestitures of assets, including Instagram and WhatsApp; prohibit Facebook from imposing anticompetitive conditions on software developers; and require Facebook to seek prior notice and approval for future mergers and acquisitions," the Federal Trade Commission said in a statement.

A coalition of 48 states launched an anti-trust lawsuit against Facebook alleging the company continues to stifle competition to protect its monopoly power, New York Attorney General Letita James said in a press release on Wednesday.

"For nearly a decade, Facebook has used its dominance and monopoly power to crush smaller rivals and snuff out competition, all at the expense of everyday users," James said in the release.

The actions against Facebook are reminiscent in some way of those directed at Microsoft in 2000, that led to the personal computing and software giant breaking itself into different operating units.

US regulators and state attorney-generals are also taking internet search behemoth Google to task for anti-trust violations.

The FTC alleged that Facebook has illegally maintained its personal social networking monopoly through a years-long course of anticompetitive conduct.

The complaint alleges that the company deployed a systematic strategy - that featured its 2012 acquisition of up-and-coming rival Instagram, its 2014 acquisition of the mobile messaging app WhatsApp, and the imposition of anti-competitive conditions on software developers - to eliminate threats to its monopoly.

"Personal social networking is central to the lives of millions of Americans," Ian Conner, director of the FTC's Bureau of Competition, said in the statement issued by the regulator. "Facebook's actions to entrench and maintain its monopoly deny consumers the benefits of competition. Our aim is to roll back Facebook's anticompetitive conduct and restore competition so that innovation and free competition can thrive."

The FTC said it was seeking a permanent injunction in federal court that could, among other things require divestitures of assets, including Instagram and WhatsApp; prohibit Facebook from imposing anticompetitive conditions on software developers; and require Facebook to seek prior notice and approval for future mergers and acquisitions.

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Seventeen US States Back Texas Lawsuit Asking Supreme Court to Overturn Election Results

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - Seventeen US states filed a brief on Wednesday at the country's Supreme Court in support of Texas' lawsuit to overturn the presidential election results.

On Tuesday, Texas filed a lawsuit seeking to block the states of Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin from participating in the electoral college.

The amici curiae (literally "friends of court") brief included Missouri, Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, and West Virginia.

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Russia Deployed Ground-Based Laser to Blind American Space Sensors - US Intelligence Chief

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - Russia has already deployed a ground-based laser weapon which could disable or blind US space-based sensors on orbiting surveillance satellites, Director of National Intelligence (DNI) John Ratcliffe said on Wednesday.

"Russia has fielded a ground-based laser weapon which could disable or blind our space based sensors," Ratcliffe said at a National Space Council meeting.

Russia earlier this year had one of its satellites maneuver close to a US government satellite in orbit, the DNI chief added.

"We consider this to be threatening behavior," he said.

US economic prosperity and national security now relied on space systems that its adversaries were increasingly threatening, Ratcliffe said.

He also said China, which poses the greatest national security threat, can destroy US satellites up to geosynchronous orbit (more than 22,000 miles above the earth).

The Intelligence Community was also setting up a new Space Council to intersect national security needs and capabilities with the US commercial sector and private industry, Ratcliffe added.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov earlier this year said Russia has always been and remains committed to the full demilitarization of space.

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WHO Americas Chief Calls for Boosting Hospital Capacity Due to Spike in COVID-19 Cases

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) is calling for an increase in hospital capacity amid the spike in coronavirus cases, Director Carissa Etienne said on Wednesday.

"Figures and trends make it clear that our region must redouble preventive measures, especially in preparation for the year-end holidays. Now is not the time to relax," Etienne said. "We're once again in need of coordinated efforts to boost hospital capacity in the most affected areas because when hospitals can't accommodate everyone who is sick, many will die waiting for care."

Etienne said North America's continued rise in infections and the winter temperatures may prompt people to gather more indoors in poorly ventilated areas. She also said in Central America including Honduras and Guatemala are experiencing a rise in cases in the areas affected by recent hurricanes.

"With cases and deaths mounting, Brazil's health system is under strain and hospitals are at capacity in some areas," she said. "We're also seeing rises in cases and deaths in areas of Colombia bordering Venezuela and Ecuador."

The director added that Paraguay is now facing a spike in infections.

Etienne revealed that PAHO's Directing Council will meet this week to discuss preparations for vaccine introductions and purchases of vaccines through the PAHO Revolving Fund and the COVAX facility.

PAHO serves as Regional Office for the Americas of the World Health Organization (WHO).

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Pandemic Helps US Cut 2020 Carbon Emissions by 11% - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - Restrictions on economic activity from coronavirus containment measures promise to reduce US output of carbon dioxide by 11 percent in 2020, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) said in a report on Wednesday.

"This year, US energy consumption was heavily affected by responses to COVID-19, including working from home and other stay-at-home measures, closed or limited operating hours for several types of businesses, and travel restrictions," the report said.

Reduced consumption of petroleum products accounted for nearly half (45 percent) of the 2020 emissions reduction, with carbon output from the transportation sector falling 102 million metric tons in April to the lowest monthly level since February 1983, the report also said.

Natural gas accounted for 36 percent of the reduction in carbon output, with electricity generation consuming the largest amount of the clean burning fuel, the report added.

Coal emissions of carbon dioxide are expected to drop 4,597 million metric tons in 2020, or 19 percent of the total emissions reduction. Electric power companies are also the biggest users of coal, which peaked in 2007 before beginning to lose market share to natural gas and renewables, according to the report.

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Republican Party Loses More Legal Challenges Against Biden Wins in Pennsylvania, Michigan

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The Michigan Supreme Court rejected another Republican party bid trying to block the already-certified results for the presidential election, a court document revealed on Wednesday.

"On order of the Court, the motions for immediate consideration are GRANTED. The petition for extraordinary writs and declaratory relief is considered, and it is DENIED, because the Court is not persuaded that it can or should grant the requested relief. The motions to intervene are DENIED as moot," the court document said.

In Pennsylvania, a judge denied another Republican effort to overturn President-elect Joe Biden's victory in the battleground state, ruling that the court's jurisdiction is "doubtful," according to a separate court document.

Following the presidential election on November 3, US President Donald Trump has been insisting that widespread voter fraud took place. The Trump campaign has filed more than 50 lawsuits, most of which have been rejected or dismissed, according to an AP count. The legal advocacy group Democracy Docker said, as of Tuesday, the Trump campaign and its allies have lost 52 of 53 post-election lawsuits.

On Tuesday, the US Supreme Court rejected another lawsuit filed by Republican Congressman Mike Kelly seeking to nullify the certification of results in Pennsylvania over expanded mail-in voting.

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US FTC Sues Facebook to Require Divestitures of Instagram, WhatsApp - Statement

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US Makes No Demands on Russia to End Military Relationship With Syria - Special Envoy

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The United States does not demand that Russian troops leave Syria as a condition for a political solution to the conflict in the latter as

Russo-Syrian military ties date back to the pre-war era, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Joel Rayburn said in a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"We have not held out as a condition for the political solution to the conflict that the long-standing Russian military relationship with the government of Syria has to end. We haven't held that out," Rayburn, who is also US Special Envoy for Syria, told the US House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Rayburn explained that the US formula for political settlement calls for withdrawal of foreign forces that arrived in Syria in 2011 or later while Russia has had a naval base in the Syrian city of Tartus since the Cold War.

"So the Russians had a naval presence there for decades before 2011. We have not tried to press for their pre-existing relationship to end," he said.

Rayburn added that it will be up to a future Syrian government and the Syrian people to decide on their foreign relations and the United States "rely on them to do that."

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Biden Defense Chief Pick Austin to Take on Task of Rebuilding Alliances - VP-Elect Harris

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden's nominee for the Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin will have to work on rebuilding American alliances across the world, Vice President-elect Kamala Harris said on Wednesday.

"Even as we work to contain this pandemic and responsibly open our economy, we also need to lead the Defense Department into the future, rebuild and renew global alliances and partnerships and make sure the United States is prepared to address new threats and new challenges from cyber to climate," Harris said officially introducing together with Biden their pick for the Pentagon chief.

If confirmed, former US Central Command head, Austin, would be the first African American to lead the Defense Department.

In his speech, the nominee said that he understands the role the Department of Defense plays in defending and supporting critical alliances around the world including in the Indo-Pacific and Europe.

"America is strong as long as it works with allies. Over the years I worked hand in hand with our diplomatic colleagues and partners around the globe and witnessed first hand what we are able to accomplish together," Austin said.

The nominee added that he looks forward "to resuming this important work," if confirmed.

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Coalition of 48 States Files Antitrust Suit Against Facebook - NY Attorney General

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - A coalition of 48 states has launched an anti-trust lawsuit against Facebook alleging that the company continues to stifle competition and protect its monopoly power, New York Attorney General Letita James said in a press release on Wednesday.

For nearly a decade, Facebook has used its dominance and monopoly power to crush smaller rivals and snuff out competition, all at the expense of everyday users," James said in the release.

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Biden Says Asked Congress to Provide Waiver to Nominate Lloyd Austin as Defense Secretary

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - Presumed President-elect Joe Biden said during a press conference on Wednesday that he asked Congress to provide a waiver to allow him to nominate retired US Army General Lloyd Austin to be his Secretary of Defense because Austin has not been out of the military for the required 7 years.

"I asked the Congress to grant a waiver for Secretary-designate Austin," Biden told reporters.

Austin previously served as the head of the Central Command.

Biden praised Austin for his role in pulling out 150,000 US troops from Iraq during President Barack Obama's tenure, adding that the general practiced good diplomacy when engaging with Iraqi and other US partners in the Middle East.

Other Biden cabinet picks include Antony Blinken to be Secretary of State, Avril Haines to be Director of National Intelligence, Linda Thomas-Greenfield to be US Ambassador to the United Nations and former Federal Reserve chairwoman Janet Yellen to lead the Treasury Department.

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US Names Leading Advocate of Tough Policy Against China to Chair Defense Board - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - Michael Pillsbury, who directs the Hudson Institute think tank's Center on Chinese Strategy, has been named chairman of the Defense Policy Board, the US Department of Defense said in a press release on Wednesday.

"Today, the Department of Defense announces that it intends to appoint Hudson Institute China policy expert Michael Pillsbury to serve as the Chair of the Defense Policy Board, and former National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) Administrator Lisa Gordon-Hagerty as a member," the release said.

Pillsbury, the author of multiple books, is sometimes described as an architect of President Donald Trump's hard-line approach to China that includes trade penalties, military challenges to

Beijing's disputed territorial claims and a near ban on the Chinese telecommunications equipment.

Gordon-Hagerty is an scientist who until recently served as Undersecretary of Energy for Nuclear Security and Administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration.

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YouTube Bans Videos Alleging Fraud in US Presidential Election - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - YouTube said in a statement on Wednesday that it will remove videos that allege election fraud changed the outcome of this year's presidential election.

"We will start removing any piece of content uploaded today (or anytime after) that misleads people by alleging that widespread fraud or errors changed the outcome of the 2020 US Presidential election, in line with our approach towards historical US Presidential elections," the statement said.

The statement said that more than 8,000 channels and thousands of election-related videos that YouTube characterized as being "misleading" have been removed from the video sharing platform since September.

US President Donald Trump has said he won the election but victory was snatched from him via massive election and voter fraud and acts of impropriety. Trump has sought redress of his grievance by seeking recounts in several states as well as filing lawsuits in state and federal courts.

Meanwhile, numerous Trump supporters - and others - have posted evidence of election irregularities on various social media platforms. Several states have said they did not find evidence of widespread fraud and substantial irregularities.

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US Seizes Over 100 'Switch' Devices That Convert Handguns to Machine Guns - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - Police has seized 117 switch devices, which turn ordinary handguns into rapid-fire automatic weapons, during the arrest of a man who stockpiled illegal firearms in the city of Chicago, the US Justice Department announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"[Leonard] Johnson was arrested Monday after agents from the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives executed a search warrant at his home. The agents seized five firearms, including three machine guns, and approximately 117 "switch" devices, according to a criminal complaint and affidavit filed in US District Court in Chicago," the release said.

Johnson made an initial court appearance on Tuesday before US Magistrate Judge Jeffrey Gilbert in Chicago and was ordered to remain in federal custody pending a Friday detention. The switch turns a semi-automatic handgun into a fully automatic weapon capable of firing dozens of rounds in seconds.

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Lawmakers Seek Information on Possible Kushner Conflict of Interest in Qatar Deal - Letter

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - Senator Ron Wyden and Congressman Joaquin Castro on Wednesday sent in a letter to the White House senior counsel to seek information regarding reports that Trump adviser Jared Kushner may have used his position to strong arm Qatar into providing bailout money to help his family's real estate company pay a \$1.4 billion debt.

"We write to seek information on any ethics guidance that has been provided to Senior White House Advisor Jared Kushner on potential conflicts of interest related to Kushner Companies, a real estate company owned and operated by his family in which he remains a significant investor," the letter to White House Senior Counsel Scott Gast said.

The lawmakers said US policy toward Qatar in 2017 appeared to be altered after the country declined to invest in a property owned by the Kushner family in New York City. The lawmakers pointed out that President Donald Trump decided to support a blockade against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) imposed on Qatar.

In 2018, the Kushner family received the financing from Brookfield Assets Management, which has links to Qatar and the UAE, the letter said. The company finalized a \$1.28 billion deal to purchase a 99-year lease for the property that allowed the family to pay its debt.

The lawmakers are requesting the White House to provide any information related to possible conflict of interest issues involving Kushner diplomatic work and his family's business by December 23.

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China Has Not Provided Enough Debt Relief for Lenders Amid Pandemic - World Bank

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - China needs to provide more debt relief to borrowers amid the novel coronavirus pandemic, World Bank President David Malpass said on Wednesday.

"China has done some debt relief but not enough," Malpass said. "Very important are the interest rate levels that are being charged. Many of the Chinese creditors are still charging very high interest rates, and then they show it on their balance sheet in China, as if it's a payable as an asset at that high interest rate."

Malpass also said China needs to recognize that many bottom-tier countries are not able to pay falling interest rates.

"There needs to be a process to reflect much, much lower interest rates in its (lending) contracts, and also in the balance sheets of the institutions," he said.

Malpass noted that China also needs to recognize how its trading partners were influencing its V-shaped recovery and interact with them and the rest of the world in a constructive way by encouraging demand.

"That V-shaped recovery has been heavily fueled by export growth. Meaning China is providing the supply and the rest of the world is providing the demand and so there's that imbalance in the global relationship. I think China could constructively make progress by encouraging more demand in China," Malpass said.

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US Special Envoy Says Sanctioning Russia Over Syria Remains 'Distinct Possibility'

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The United States may sanction Russia over the ongoing conflict in Syria, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Joel Rayburn said during a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"That remains a distinct possibility," Rayburn replied to a question why not designate "Russians" under the Caesar Act, which have so far targeted 90 individuals and entities, almost all of them in Syria.

Rayburn, who is also Special Envoy for Syria, earlier said that the US "certainly will extend Caesar Act designations to non-Syrians in the future."

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Over 60 Countries, 130 Telephone Companies Forswear China's 5G Technology - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - More than 60 states so far have forsworn China's 5G technology and they hold nearly two-thirds of the world's GDP, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Wednesday.

"We today have over 60 countries that have said we are not going to permit that to happen, 27 out of 29 EU countries," Pompeo said. "I think number now is 67 percent of the globe's GDP has forsworn technology that is not trusted mandating trusted vendors."

Pompeo also said that some 130 telephone companies have forsworn China's 5G technology.

"The State Department led that effort. We are proud of what we have achieved, we still have more," Pompeo added.

China and the United States have disagreed over which country gets to call itself the progenitor of 5G technology. With Chinese giant Huawei heavily outpacing its US competitors, the Trump

administration has sought to kneecap the Chinese tech giant with sanctions, including in other Western countries.

In August 2018, US President Donald Trump signed a decree that barred US government departments from using network equipment made by Huawei and ZTE. Similarly, the UK government said in July that the country's 5G networks would also be Huawei-free starting from January 2021 to the end of 2027.

Several other European countries, including Slovenia, Poland, Estonia and the Czech Republic, have banned Huawei from 5G state contracts, citing risks to their national security.

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US Sanctions 3 Individuals, 3 Chinese Companies Under Magnitsky Act - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The US government has imposed sanctions on three individuals and three companies in Africa and Asia under the Global Magnitsky Act, the Treasury Department announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"Today, on International Anti-Corruption Day, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is targeting corrupt actors and their networks across several countries in Africa and Asia," the Treasury Department said.

The designations include Wan Kuok Koi, also commonly known as "Broken Tooth," a member of the Communist Party of China's (CCP) Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Raimbek Matraimov (Matraimov), a former deputy of the Kyrgyz Customs Service and Liberian Senator Harry Varney Gboto-Nambi Sherman.

"Matraimov ... was involved in a customs scheme in which at least \$700 million was laundered from the Kyrgyz Republic. The scheme involved a company and their evasion of customs fees," the release said.

Sherman, Chair of the Liberian Senate Judiciary Committee, offered bribes to multiple judges associated with his trial for a 2010 bribery scheme and has routinely paid judges to decide cases in his favor, the Treasury Department said.

"Wan is a leader of the 14K Triad, one of the largest Chinese organized criminal organizations in the world that engages in drug trafficking, illegal gambling, racketeering, human trafficking, and a range of other criminal activities," the release added.

The organizations are the Dongmei Investment Group in Hong Kong, the Palau China Hung-Mun Cultural Association in Palau and the World Hongmen History and Culture Association in Cambodia, according to the release.

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US to Extend Caesar Act Sanctions to Include Non-Syrians - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The United States plans to extend its Caesar Act sanctions to individuals and entities outside Syria, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Joel Rayburn said during a Congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"We certainly will extend Caesar Act designations to non-Syrians in the future," Rayburn told the US House Foreign Affairs Committee during a hearing on US policy toward Syria.

Rayburn said the intent of using the Caesar Act provisions is to separate the Syrian government from its sources of international support.

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US Sanctions 3 Individuals, 3 Chinese Companies Under Magnitsky Act - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The US government has imposed sanctions three individuals and three companies in Africa and Asia under the Global Magnitsky Act, the Treasury Department announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"Today, on International Anti-Corruption Day, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is targeting corrupt actors and their networks across several countries in Africa and Asia," the Treasury said.

The designations include Wan Kuok Koi, also commonly known as "Broken Tooth," a member of the Communist Party of China's (CCP) Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Raimbek Matraimov (Matraimov), a former deputy of the Kyrgyz Customs Service and Liberian Senator Harry Varney Gboto-Nambi Sherman

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White House Issues Veto Threat for Bills Blocking Arms Sales to UAE - OMB

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump is poised to veto a series of US Senate resolutions aimed at blocking proposed arms sales to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the White House Office of Management and Budget said in a statement on Wednesday.

"If the President were presented with any of these joint resolutions, his advisers would recommend he veto them," the statement said.

The Senate is poised to vote later on Wednesday on the joint resolutions disapproving of Trump's \$23 billion sale of 50 F-35 fighter jets, 18 MQ-9B Reaper drones and munitions to the UAE.

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US Court Reschedules Russian National Tyurin's Sentencing for January 7 - Order

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) – A US court has decided to reschedule the sentencing hearing of Russian national Andrei Tyurin on hacking and other charges for January 7, 2021, Judge Laura Taylor Swain said in an order.

"The Court has requested that Defendant's continued sentencing proceeding take place via videoconference on the morning of January 7, 2021, at 9:00 a.m.," the judge from the New York-based federal district court said.

Tyurin was arrested in Georgia in 2017 at the US government's request. The US authorities alleged that Tyurin was involved in a global hacking campaign targeting financial institutions that resulted in the theft of personal data from more than 100 million users.

Georgia extradited Tyurin to the United States in September 2018.

In 2019, Tyurin pleaded guilty to six counts, including conspiracy to commit computer hacking, wire fraud, conspiracy to violate the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act, and conspiracy to commit bank fraud, the Justice Department said in a statement.

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Search Efforts Continue for Missing Pilot of Crashed US F-16 in Michigan - National Guard

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - Search and rescue efforts are still underway in Michigan after a US F-16 fighter jet crashed during a training mission and the pilot has not yet been located, the Wisconsin National Guard said via Twitter on Wednesday.

"Search and rescue efforts continue for the pilot of the F-16 that crashed in Michigan's Upper Peninsula last night," the statement said. "Search continued through the night and are ongoing this morning, and the pilot's status remains unknown at this time."

The Wisconsin National Guard announced earlier that its F-16 Fighting Falcon fighter jet crashed during a training flight in the US state of Michigan.

The crash occurred at around 8 p.m. local time on Tuesday, the Guard said, adding that one pilot was on board.

According to the guard, the cause of the incident is unknown and an investigation has been launched.

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US Envoy Biegun Reaffirms US Readiness for Dialogue with North Korea - State Dept

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun during a visit to South Korea reiterated Washington's willingness to engage in constructive dialogue with North Korea on denuclearizing the peninsula, State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Cale Brown said on Wednesday in a readout of his meetings in Seoul. Biegun met earlier in the day with South Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun and Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Lee Do-hoon. "The Deputy Secretary reaffirmed our commitment to the US-ROK Alliance and expressed appreciation for the ROK's continued coordination on the COVID-19 response," Brown said. "Deputy Secretary Biegun also reaffirmed US support for inter-Korean cooperation, and continued US readiness to engage in meaningful dialogue with the DPRK in the pursuit of complete denuclearization."

Biegun also called for continued cooperation with Japan to promote regional security and a free and open Indo-Pacific, Brown added.

Trump has held three summits with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. However, the two sides have not achieved a breakthrough on the issue of denuclearization because of the unresolved issue concerning sanctions relief.

The US on Tuesday unveiled new sanctions on North Korea, designating six entities and four vessels over their alleged exportation of the country's coal.

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Trump Says 'We Will Be Intervening' in Texas Election Case at Supreme Court

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump on Wednesday said his legal team would get involved in an election lawsuit filed by the state of Texas in the Supreme Court in a bid to overturn President-elect Joe Biden's victory in four other states.

"We will be INTERVENING in the Texas (plus many other states) case. This is the big one. Our Country needs a victory!," Trump said via Twitter.

The lawsuit filed on Tuesday seeks to block the states of Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin from participating in the electoral college.

